

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

We Don't Have to Give In to the Smartphones



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Since the dawn of the television age, parents have struggled to limit or guide their children's screen time.

But with the arrival of smartphones that can — and do — go everywhere and with social media apps that teenagers now use for an average of five hours every day, many parents feel a sense of resignation. The struggle has been lost. Parents who try to delay giving a smartphone until high school or social media until 16 know that they'll face the plaintive cry from their children: "But I'm the only one!"

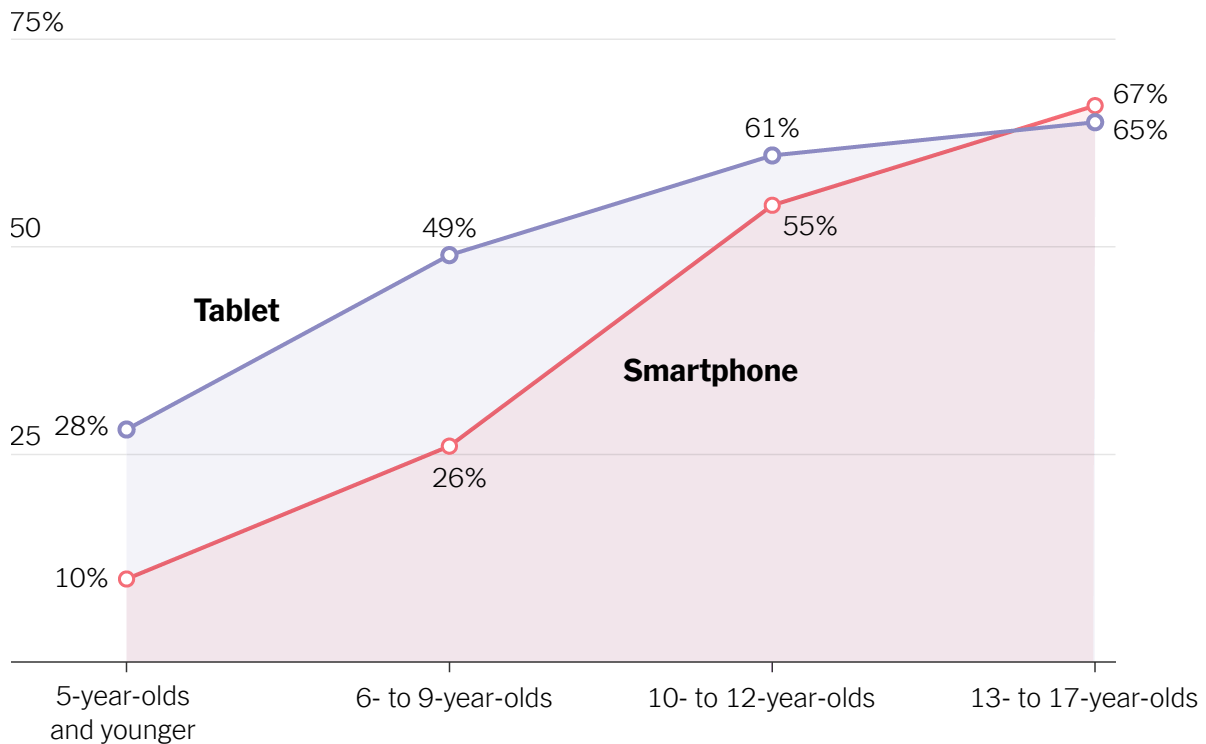
To better understand the tensions over technology playing out in American families, we worked with the Harris Poll to conduct two surveys. As we reported last year, our survey of 1,006 members of Gen Z found that many young people feel trapped — tethered to digital products like TikTok and Snapchat. Nearly half of all participants expressed regret about having access to many of the most popular social media platforms.

Here we present the second part of our investigation: a nationally representative survey of 1,013 parents who have children under 18. The overall picture isn't any better. We find widespread feelings of entrapment and regret. Many parents gave their children smartphones and social media access early in their lives — yet many wish that social media had never been invented, and overwhelmingly they support new social norms and policies that would protect kids from online harms.

In our survey, 55 percent report that their children began to use a smartphone as a primary user by the age of 12, and 61 percent say the same for a tablet.

Children are given tablets much earlier than smartphones

Share of children, by age group



Source: Harris Poll

Over the last 15 years, as children began to receive these devices at ever younger ages, social media access followed inexorably — despite the legal minimum age of 13 for companies to collect data from children without parental consent. Among children who currently use Instagram, half were doing so by the age of 13, and the same figure holds for Snapchat. For TikTok, it was slightly higher at 57 percent. (Those numbers come from the parents. Of course, many children created accounts earlier without their parents' knowledge.)

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Almost a third of parents whose children have social media believe they gave their child access to social media too young, and 22 percent feel similarly for smartphones. Notably, for both technologies, only 1 percent of parents thought they had waited too long to introduce them. In other words, parents regret the technologies they gave, not the technologies they withheld.

Why did so many parents make decisions that they regret? One major reason is that in the brief period when flip phones and other basic phones were replaced by smartphones, roughly from 2010 to 2015, there was a pervasive sense of techno-optimism. Most people were amazed by the new technology and its beneficial applications — from the mundane like hailing a car service to the profound like bringing down a dictatorship.

A common belief at the time was that being a so-called digital native would give children an advantage in the new world taking shape around us. It was only in the late 2010s that a deep unease began to arise as it became increasingly clear that children who grew up with smartphones and social media were not better adapted. In fact, they were becoming more anxious, depressed, isolated, sedentary and unable to focus.

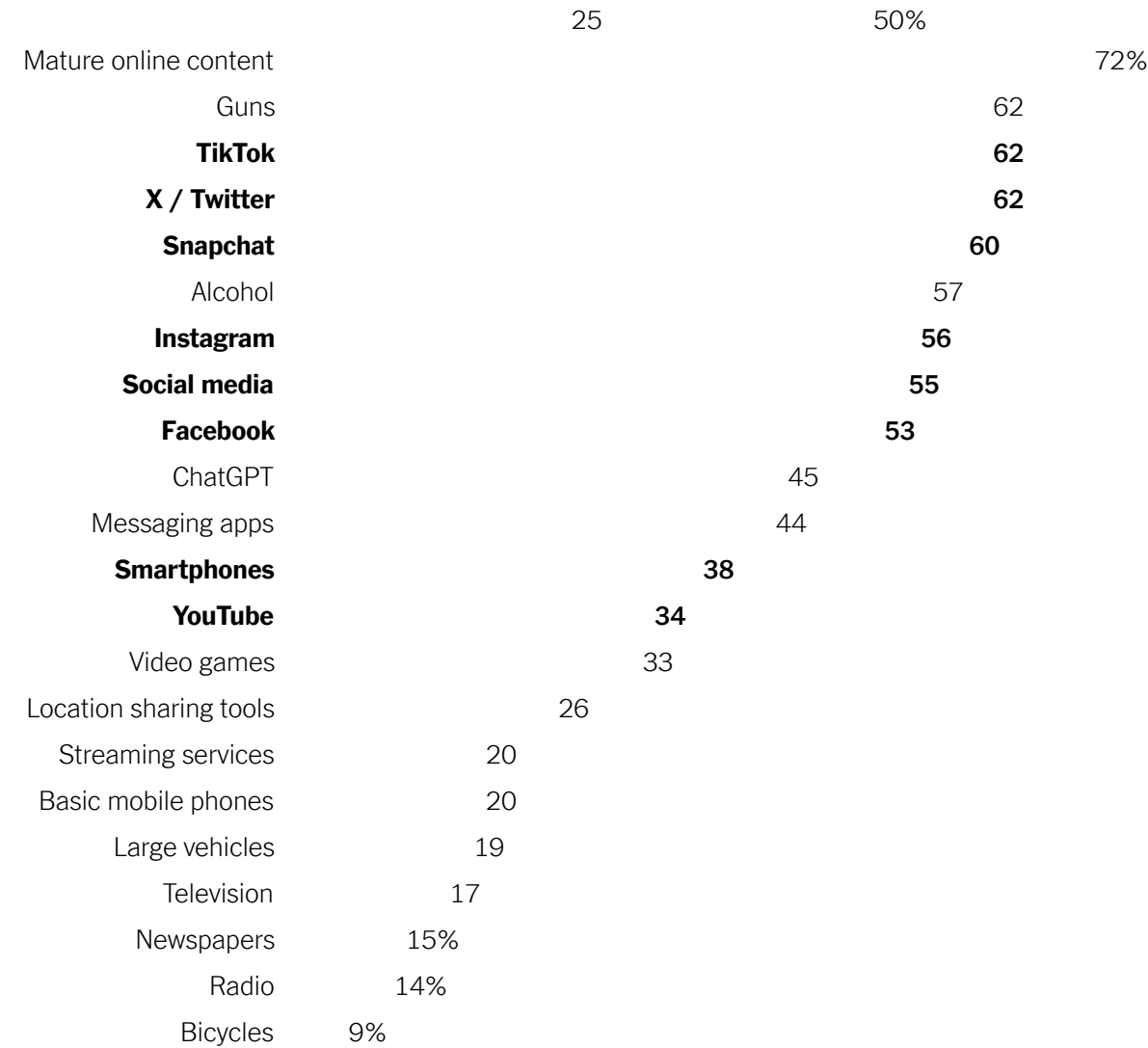
There was an additional reason for those regretted decisions: social pressure. More than one third of parents (39 percent) who had given their child a smartphone said that they would have preferred to wait but they felt they had to give in because so many of their children's friends already had one. For social media, the social pressure was even stronger: 54 percent of those who let their child have access to social media said they felt they had to because so many other families had already done so.

The digital regret shows up most clearly in a set of questions we asked about a variety of consumer products. The exact question was “When I think about my child’s experience growing up, I wish ____ had never been invented.” As the accompanying chart shows, parents have very little regret about giving bicycles to their children, even though many of their children presumably got hurt while biking at some point. In contrast, most parents perceive alcohol, guns and pornography as bad things, at least in the context of their children’s development. So what about the technologies that dominate children’s lives today? Are they closer to bicycles or to alcohol?

For smartphones and for YouTube, they are midway between. Around a third of parents regret their existence, but most don’t. In contrast, a majority of parents wish that social media in general, and Facebook and Instagram in particular, had never been invented. For X and TikTok, the percentage was 62 percent, which was higher than for alcohol and equal to guns.

A majority of parents wish social media apps didn't exist

“When I think about my child’s experience growing up, I wish ____ had never been invented”



Source: Harris Poll

It turns out that Gen Z has at least as much regret about the role that technology played in their childhoods. In our previous survey we found that 30 percent of adult Gen Z-ers agreed with the statement “I had access to smartphones too early in my life” and 34 percent said the same for social media. Forty-five percent also agreed that if or when they have children, they will not allow them to have smartphones before high school.

Most parents support these types of limits on smartphone use

Parents restricting their child’s access to smartphones until they are around 14 years old

Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither	Strongly oppose
33%	32	22	9
Somewhat oppose			

Parents restricting their child’s access to social media until at least age 16

40	33	19	6
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A law raising the minimum age for social media use to 16 from 13

39	31	20	8
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Schools enforcing a bell-to-bell “phone-free” policy

33	30	16	13	8
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Source: Harris Poll

We have proposed four norms intended to help free families from the collective action trap — the feeling that they have to give in because everyone else has done so. It’s hard for any one parent or school to act alone. But when families and schools act together, change becomes possible. These norms are meant to reinforce one another, and when combined, they offer a road map for reclaiming a healthier and more joyful childhood.

The first norm is to delay smartphones until high school. Our survey found that two-thirds of parents said they would prefer to wait until at least age 14. The second is to delay social media until age 16 — a goal supported by 73 percent of parents, with 70 percent backing a legal age minimum of 16.

The third norm is phone-free schools, where students are separated from devices from the first bell to the last, including lunch and recess; 63 percent of parents support this policy. Finally, the fourth norm is about giving kids something better to do: more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world. Forty percent of parents with children aged 6 to 12 years said they want to give their kids more freedom to be out with peers unsupervised. Among parents of teenagers, that number rises to 47 percent.

These strong levels of support cross racial, economic and political lines. And the good news is that many parents are legislators, teachers and school superintendents, and they are actively promoting these ideas. Ten states have already enacted laws making their schools phone-free. Less strict laws on phone use in schools have been enacted in 21 states, and phone-restriction laws are under consideration in 14 more states and the District of Columbia.

This is happening outside the United States, too. Every school in Brazil has gone phone-free bell-to-bell. Australia has raised the age for opening social media accounts to 16; other countries are quite likely to follow suit. The president of France, Emmanuel Macron, recently announced his intention to enact a minimum age of 15 for social media use in France if the European Union does not enact a similar restriction first.

With tech companies eagerly filling our children's lives — and their classrooms — with more new and untested technologies (A.I. “friends,” tutors and other forms of virtual reality), it is becoming that much more urgent for parents to speak up and for legislators to act.

The goal of these reforms isn't just to limit screens. It's much bigger than that. The goal is to restore childhood.

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